

Pakistani militants in the tribal areas, initially because they were suspected of hiding international terrorists but more recently because they have become a security threat to the regime itself. Today, Pakistani authorities are under increasing pressure to do more about the Afghan Taliban's sanctuaries as well, especially since these sanctuaries are seen as an impediment to the U.S. and NATO counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup>

The Afghan Taliban have consistently denied having any organizational affiliation with the Pakistani Taliban, or to have any ambition outside Afghanistan at all.<sup>36</sup> Under the current circumstances, to start engaging in international terrorism would be too risky for its overall strategy. As long as the Afghan Taliban are experiencing relative success with their present strategy, there is a lack of incentive to venture into new territory.

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## The Insurgent-Narcotic Nexus in Helmand Province

By Captain Michael Erwin, U.S. Army

FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS, there has been a rising level of collusion between insurgents and narcotic powerbrokers in Afghanistan's Helmand Province. Between 2002 and 2005, the Afghan Taliban-led insurgency in southern Afghanistan focused its attention primarily in Kandahar and Uruzgan provinces.<sup>1</sup> Coalition forces and Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) largely left the poppy fields alone in Helmand; in return, Helmand powerbrokers resisted opportunities to attack coalition forces. Militants launched sporadic attacks, but nothing similar to the level of violence in Helmand today. The violence and casualty rates in Helmand currently surpass any other province in Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, despite the highest international troop presence of anywhere in Afghanistan, the drug trade originating in Helmand is still a leading source of revenue for the insurgency in the southern part of the country.<sup>3</sup> With a limited number of troops and resources, the hope for Helmand Province, and indeed the entire region, rests on the ability to break down this relationship, known as the "insurgent-narcotic nexus."

This article will briefly outline the problems caused by past efforts of poppy eradication, relay recent successful counter-nexus operations in Helmand Province, and define the challenges ahead. Furthermore, it will explain the significance of undermining the insurgent-narcotic nexus to improve the prospects for mission success in Afghanistan.

### A Brief History

The first step to analyzing the current state of the insurgency in Helmand Province is to identify the province's three primary regions and their associated powerbrokers. In the north,

Rais Baghrani largely controls the course of the 100 mile-long valley starting just north of Musa Qala district.<sup>4</sup> Sher Mohammed Akhundzada<sup>5</sup> and his affiliates exert the most influence in the central region, where approximately 75% of the province's population resides. The historically corrupt Baluchi tribe controls a majority of the province's southern region.<sup>6</sup> Together, these distinctly different regions of Helmand are responsible for growing more than half the world's poppy.<sup>7</sup> These leaders and other narcotic powerbrokers in Helmand have formed a synergistic relationship with Taliban insurgents where they work together to plant, protect and harvest poppy fields and then transport the product to drug labs and out of the country; in exchange, the Taliban tax the farmers and also earn money when the drugs exchange hands in neighboring countries. Most major narcotics leaders have ties to the government, whether at the national or local level, and therefore coalition forces cannot target them effectively.

Until 2006, minimal coalition presence in Helmand clearly signaled to Helmand Afghans that their livelihood of growing poppies was secure. This changed in the summer of 2006 when coalition forces entered the province in sizeable numbers and were accompanied by a

<sup>4</sup> Rais Baghrani fought against the Russians in the 1980s and was formerly a high-ranking member of the Taliban in the 1990s under Mullah Omar's leadership. In 2005, after eluding coalition forces for more than three years, Baghrani accepted amnesty and abandoned the Taliban movement. He still controls the Baghran Valley, however, which is responsible for growing a significant amount of poppy. He is clearly involved in the drug trade, but he is no longer an ideological member of the Taliban movement.

<sup>5</sup> Sher Mohammed Akhundzada is married to President Hamid Karzai's sister. He was the former governor of Helmand Province but was removed from office by President Karzai under pressure from the United Kingdom for his role in narcotics; an estimated nine tons of poppy was discovered in the basement of his house in 2005. Since his departure from governorship, violence has skyrocketed in Helmand Province.

<sup>6</sup> The Baluchi tribe numbers an estimated 120,000 in southern Helmand and controls the southern-most districts, most notably the area called Baram Cha, which is the gateway for drugs moving to Pakistan and weapons/ammunition moving into Afghanistan.

<sup>7</sup> "U.S. Aims to Deprive Taliban of Drug Revenue by Promoting Alternate Crops to Opium," Associated Press, June 27, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> "Taliban's Sanctuary Bases in Pakistan Must be Eliminated," RAND Corporation, June 9, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> "Interview with Taliban Spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid," NEFA Foundation, February 1, 2008.

<sup>1</sup> Personal discussion, MSG Tristan Schlientz, Kandahar, Afghanistan, August 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Waugh, "1,000 Killed or Wounded in Afghan Conflict," *London Evening Standard*, August 17, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Karen DeYoung, "U.S. and Britain Again Target Poppy Crop," *Washington Post*, August 2009.

significantly more aggressive poppy eradication effort.<sup>8</sup> The eradication program—backed by both the Afghan government and coalition forces—cultivated within the provincial population intense feelings of mistrust and disdain for the government, Afghan security forces and coalition troops.<sup>9</sup> While poppy eradication achieved relative success in Nangarhar Province in 2005, Afghans who stand against the narcotics industry in Helmand are often targeted with violence that extends to their family and tribe.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, since aggressive poppy eradication began in 2006, narco-powerbrokers have worked much closer with the Taliban than ever before.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, progress in Helmand Province will not come quickly.

#### Needed Departure from Eradication Efforts

The first meaningful step toward progress occurred in June 2009 when the government and coalition forces announced that they would no longer support poppy eradication.<sup>12</sup> As stated by the U.S. envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, “eradication is a waste of money” and has only worked to drive Afghan farmers to the Taliban.<sup>13</sup> The implication of this decision means that insurgent and narcotic leaders can no longer use poppy eradication as a rallying cry to recruit more insurgents.

This does not mean, however, that the Afghan government and coalition forces have abandoned the effort to reduce the province’s poppy production. Instead, focus and resources have shifted to targeting narcotics in the consolidation

and transportation phases by raiding drug laboratories and interdicting narcotics convoys. This change of policy will lead to more large-scale poppy interdiction without directly affecting farmers’ livelihood.

The insurgent-narcotic nexus is the biggest obstacle to progress in Helmand. Breaking down their ability to cooperate freely is the key to success. While maintaining a significant number of troops deployed to the province is essential, sending more forces specifically to Helmand—especially at the expense of other provinces in the

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southern region which are all under-resourced—is not necessary. As one Special Forces officer who served in Helmand from January-July 2009 explained,

75% of Helmand’s population lives in the central portion of the province; we need to do more with less throughout the province, but especially in this area. We can accomplish this by focusing our targeting efforts against high pay-off targets at the right time—or in other words, aggressively attacking the nexus and keeping the pressure on both components until they turn on each other.<sup>14</sup>

In his statement, the officer accurately conveyed that there is a solution, but it revolves around targeting the nexus more effectively and refraining from targeting the farmers’ crops.

Before the policy shift regarding poppy eradication was announced, coalition forces achieved enormous success in February-May 2009. This period

witnessed the most effective targeting of the insurgent-narcotic nexus in Helmand to date. Amid several other significant counternarcotics operations, U.S. Special Forces conducted Operation Siege Engine during a period of five weeks in April and May that interdicted millions of dollars worth of poppy, precursor chemicals, weapons and ammunition. It was not an eradication effort, but an operation to attack the narcotics industry where it is most vulnerable: in its consolidation phases.<sup>15</sup> The operation prevented approximately \$4.3 million from reaching the hands of insurgent commanders.<sup>16</sup>

While the amount of seized material is staggering (39,000 lbs of wet opium, 300,000 lbs of poppy seed and an estimated 120,000 lbs of precursor chemicals—ammonium nitrate, soda ash, activated charcoal and Acidic Anhydride), these operations served an equally significant role of exposing the strength and depth of the relationship between the Taliban-led insurgency and the narcotics world.<sup>17</sup> Not only did coalition forces uncover large quantities of improvised explosive devices (IED), mortars, rockets, blasting caps and explosives on each of the counternarcotics operations, but every raid against the targets also witnessed an aggressive insurgent response where they launched attacks against coalition forces in an attempt to minimize destruction of their narcotics, weapons and ammunition.<sup>18</sup> Several of these missions uncovered “Taliban infirmaries” and rooms where insurgent leadership met to plan future attacks against Afghan security forces and coalition forces—further proof of these targets’ significance to the insurgency.

Success has come at a price, however. Fueled by narco-powerbrokers’ funds, insurgents have fought especially fierce in Helmand during the summer of 2009 against the Afghan government, ANSF and coalition forces comprised of the British, Danish and the newly-arrived U.S. 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Expeditionary Brigade. The insurgent-narcotic nexus

8 This information is based on the author’s personal account from his deployment in 2006 and 2007.

9 Personal discussions, Special Forces soldiers deployed to Helmand Province, Kandahar, Afghanistan, 2006, 2007, 2009.

10 Poppy eradication has achieved more success in Nangarhar Province than in Helmand. One reason is that Nangarhar has a more manageable number of poppy fields located more closely together; this is not the case in Helmand. Despite this “success story,” the lack of government support and alternative crops has left many farmers frustrated in Nangarhar.

11 Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).

12 “U.S. Aims to Deprive Taliban of Drug Revenue by Promoting Alternate Crops to Opium.”

13 Ibid.

14 Personal discussion, Major Mark Smith, Bastion, Helmand Province, Afghanistan, February 2009.

15 A month later, Ambassador Holbrooke announced this policy shift.

16 Personal discussions, Drug Enforcement Administration, Kandahar, Afghanistan, May 2009.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

is combining their efforts to maintain control over the most fertile province in the country because insurgents and narcotic warlords, especially those with ties to Sher Mohammed Akhundzada in central Helmand, understand that losing their grip on the province means losing money and influence—and an indication

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of progress for the government and coalition forces.<sup>19</sup> As the summer draws to a close, it is almost assured that the insurgent operational tempo will remain higher in Helmand Province than anywhere else in the country, precisely for this reason.

**Corruption Remains a Block to Progress**

One of the most significant obstacles to progress in Helmand Province is corruption within the government and Afghan security forces—at the national and district levels—which is directly tied to the poppy trade. As numerous interviews with Afghans reveal, the sentiment many people in Helmand feel toward the government is evident from a single sentence spoken by a businessman in Helmand’s Musa Qala district: “The Taliban were not good, but these people now—the government—they are thieves and killers.”<sup>20</sup> Lasting success in Helmand requires the government and its security forces to significantly reduce their connections (and protection) to the narcotics trade.

National and local level government and ANSF consistently accept bribes from narco-powerbrokers to facilitate instability and the booming poppy

business.<sup>21</sup> There have been several instances in 2009 where IEDs have exploded on coalition patrols between two ANSF checkpoints only 600 meters apart.<sup>22</sup> Afghan National Police (ANP) have allowed poppy shipments to pass through their checkpoints, or worse yet use their government vehicles to transport the poppy themselves.<sup>23</sup> Failure to curb the rampant corruption during the past three years has enabled the insurgent-narcotic nexus to expand and strengthen. In a country where corruption and bribery are widely accepted as part of day-to-day life, this task is much easier said than done. Although the current Helmand governor, Gulav Mangal, is struggling to reduce the province’s narcotics output, he continues to encounter resistance and corruption and cannot reform the province on his own.

On the heels of the elections and in conjunction with the increase of coalition forces in the province, the people of Helmand need to witness improvement in their government and security forces by early 2010; otherwise, the people of Helmand may permanently lose hope in their government’s and coalition forces’ ability to bring stability to the province.

**Conclusion**

The biggest overarching obstacle to stability in Afghanistan remains the volatile southern region. Enhancing security in the south requires progress in numerous areas, but reducing the insurgency’s rampant funding is an essential part of the equation. A large portion of the insurgency’s monetary backing originates in Helmand (estimates range from 40-70%<sup>24</sup>). It is used to pay for weapons and ammunition and is distributed to locals who help fight Afghan government and coalition

forces. This money fuels the insurgency and helps to expand its influence.

The Taliban-led insurgency and the Afghan narcotics trade rely on each other; a weaker counterpart would significantly hinder the other’s movement. Reducing the insurgency’s links to the narcotics trade within Helmand Province during the course of the next 18 months is critical to the future success of this objective. Moreover, by moving away from government and international poppy eradication efforts, villagers and farmers are less likely to support the insurgency.

Working independently, the Afghan government, its security forces and coalition troops are not strong enough to undermine the insurgent-narcotic nexus in Helmand Province. If these entities work in concert, however, the Afghan people and the international community will achieve progress and preserve hope for Afghanistan’s future.

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21 There are numerous powerbrokers at the local level that bribe ANSF and government officials, but the most notorious is Abdul Rahman Jan (“ARJ”) who was the former Helmand provincial chief of police. He has ties to numerous leaders within ANSF and works with them to ensure the movement of drugs.

22 Personal discussions, SFC Charles Rodriguez, Kandahar, Afghanistan, February 2009.

23 Ibid.; Numerous Afghans have made these assertions to soldiers in the unit.

24 In *Seeds of Terror*, Gretchen Peters claims the number to be at 70%; recent figures claim 40% with the remaining funds originating from patrons in the Gulf states.

19 M.J. Stephey, “Stan McChrystal: The New U.S. Commander in Afghanistan,” *Time Magazine*, May 12, 2009.

20 Kathy Gannon, “The Taliban Shadow Government,” Associated Press, August 18, 2009.